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ABSTRACT

Four articles from this special report examine the charter school movement and whether it has the staying power to change American schooling. The articles are: (1) "Declarations of Independence" (Mark Walsh), which discusses the Boston Renaissance and Marblehead charter schools in Massachusetts, among others; (2) "Laws of the Land" (Drew Lindsay), which provides a brief overview of the history of education reform and some state laws; (3) "American Visionaries" (Lonnie Harp), which compares the charter school movement in Arizona to other states efforts and examines one former teacher's charter-application process; and (4) Charter School Resources, organizations which can provide more information, including on-line sources, some for purchase and some free of charge. (MAH)

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Breaking Away
An *Education Week* Special Report

Education Week, v15 n13

November 29, 1995

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Education Week
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This disk contains all of the articles and charts from Education Week's special report "Breaking Away," which was published November 29, 1995. This report examines the charter school movement and whether it has the saying power to change the face of American schooling.

The special report was made possible by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

BREAKING AWAY

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Declarations of Independence

By Mark Walsh
Boston

In a squat city building on a gray autumn day, workers are putting on the finishing touches.

New walls, paint, floors, and furniture have replaced the drab fixtures from the days when the University of Massachusetts held night classes here. And though the renovations aren't complete, hundreds of children have begun their school day in the classrooms the workers have created inside. Basoln a meeting room on the first floor of the Boston Renaissance Charter School, about 100 people have gathered to celebrate the transformation. For many of them, the rebirth of this structure as one of Massachusetts' first charter schools serves as a perfect symbol of what such schools can do for public education in America: Take a tired, worn-out old structure and pump it full of new life.

The basic charter concept is simple: Allow a group of teachers or other would-be educators to apply for permission to open a school. Give them dollar for dollar what a public school gets for each student but without any strings attached. Free them from the regulations that cripple learning and stifle innovation at so many public schools.

In the four years since the first charter schools opened their doors in Minnesota, 18 other states have passed charter laws in various forms, and 234 of the schools are now up and running around the country. In many cases, the new independent public schools have invigorated public education and filled parents and teachers with new enthusiasm. Dozens of individual theories about better teaching or improved school organization are getting a test run. Charter schools have generated ``an impressive level of interest and energy among parents and teachers and, in a strikingly bipartisan way, among elected officials," says Ted Kolderie, an education analyst with the Center for Policy Studies in St. Paul, Minn. But the movement has never been simply about the schools. If it results in only a few hundred ``boutique" schools with innovative ideas, even the movement's strongest backers will call it a failure. The goal has been to provoke changes in the entire U.S. education system. In this larger context, it remains far less

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certain that the charter school movement has staying power.

Despite the fanfare that accompanied the early charter laws, it is unclear whether they are strong enough to allow the movement to flourish. And several laws passed recently in other states limit both the number of charter schools and the freedom from regulation that is at the heart of the concept. Experts on both sides agree that the movement has reached a critical juncture. And many of its leaders say that success or failure now rests with the schools themselves: that it's up to them to produce. A lot of people here are betting that Boston Renaissance will produce from the scores of parents who have put their children on waiting lists to get in all the way up to Gov. William F. Weld, who has made charter schools a focus of his education program. To come up with the $400,000 to turn this building into a school took an unusual alliance of public and private agencies: the local foundation that received the charter; a state lending agency; and the Edison Project, the private, for-profit concern that this fall has also taken over the management of three traditional public schools in other states.

Boston Renaissance is unlike any other charter school to date. With more than 600 students in grades kindergarten through 5, it is among the nation's largest. Like other Edison Project schools, it features a longer school day and year and a rigorous curriculum that emphasizes classical academics as well as state- of-the-art computer technology. In a city where race and education have long been a volatile mix, Renaissance has attracted a diverse student body that reflects the school-age population of Boston: 52 percent black, 25 percent white, 17 percent Hispanic, and 6 percent of Asian descent. ``This is what all schools should be like," Gov. Weld tells the educators, parents, and civic leaders gathered here for the dedication ceremony. ``Years of hot air and, frankly, lukewarm efforts at reform have not done enough to shake up the system," the governor says. ``For the same amount of money that leaves some of our children on the economic sidelines, I really believe that Renaissance is going to give children a world-class education." One virtue of charter schools is that no two are alike. Each is tailored to the specific needs of the students, teachers, and the community it serves. Like the one in Marblehead, Mass. Less than an hour's drive from downtown Boston, the postcard-perfect seaside community won its independence from nearby Salem in 1648. Its 20,000 residents retain that spirit of individuality today, a spirit that is visible throughout the small charter school they have created in the old Elks lodge on the edge of town. Indeed, the Marblehead Community Charter Public School seems like a

scale model of Yankee independence. Its interdisciplinary curriculum is built around individual learning plans, and New England-style town meetings give each of the school's 137 students a say in how it should be run. When a visitor arrives, students come forward with characteristic gumption to introduce themselves.

The Marblehead school also embodies one of the key principles that parents and students around the country say draws them to charter schools: Small is good. ``Because of smaller classes, kids aren't going to get away with goofing off as easily," says Christina Goodwin, a polite 13- year-old 7th grader who pauses for a moment between classes to answer a visitor's questions. Behind her, a group of students mops the hallway floor. All the students at the school help out with simple chores sweeping up, filling the paper-towel holders, taking out the trash. Debra Hammel, the mother of a 6th grader and a volunteer in the school's front office, says the school's size and approach were a better fit for her son's learning style. ``I love the ownership that the kids take in the school," she says. ``It's a real democratic process."

But the notion of a separate, special school didn't fit everyone's notion of where Marblehead ought to be going with its schools. Some residents don't like to see money that would go to the town's traditional public school system diverted to the charter school. ``It's been said that Marblehead doesn't like change," says Hammel. ``It's competition. Where there is competition, there is defensiveness." Of course, competition is a fundamental element of the charter concept, as with other school choice schemes. It is also one of the chief objections to them. Many critics argue that charter schools in Massachusetts and elsewhere shift scarce public dollars away from the traditional public schools to untested and potentially detrimental experiments. ``These schools have been in operation for less than three months. Yet, when you talk to some members of the Weld administration, you'd think charters have already cured all the ills of the educational system," says Robert J. Murphy, the president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association. ``We still feel innovation can occur within the system," he adds. In Massachusetts, the legislature sought to cushion the loss of state aid to communities with charter schools by creating a special reimbursement plan. But some districts, like Marblehead, still face a shortfall, and the compensation is designed to last only a few years. Some parents who helped organize the Marblehead charter school told The Boston Globe that their children were bullied last spring at their regular public schools because of the push for the charter school. ``People are afraid of change," says Karen Corcoran,

a leader of the organizers, who has since moved to another community because of the hostility.

Carl Goodman, a lawyer and former town selectman, is leading a legal challenge to the Marblehead charter school and to the state's charter law. He argues that several of its provisions violate the state constitution's ban on public funding of schools that are not ``publicly owned and under the exclusive control" of government agents. Similar legal attacks have been mounted against charter laws in other states. In Michigan, for example, the state teachers' union led a partially successful challenge to the law and forced the state legislature to rewrite it. In Colorado, the Denver school board has resisted orders from the state board of education to approve a charter for a school planned by a veteran public school teacher. The dispute is being hashed out in the courts.

In response to Goodman's arguments, the state of Massachusetts argues that charter schools are public and that their leadership boards are public agents. But Goodman believes that charters not only run afoul of the state constitution but are bad public policy as well. State bureaucrats, he says, are making key decisions about how state education dollars will be spent in local communities. ``Why should the few people who get the ear of a political appointee get a portion of the budget that is otherwise controlled by the elected [town] school committee?" he wonders. ``If we are to spend several hundred thousand dollars in our town, perhaps the taxpayers would like a say about it." The seeds of the charter school movement were sown in California, says Joe Nathan, the director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota. In the mid-1980s, California educators began debating the idea of freeing teachers to create their own public schools. In 1991, Minnesota passed the nation's first charter school law. It authorized no more than eight schools statewide and required each to receive the blessing of its local school board. Nathan, a leading backer of charter schools nationwide, says Minnesota's original law was a badly flawed political compromise that failed to embody the true promise of charters. The legislature has tinkered with it since 1991, and though Nathan says it is better, he believes it is still imperfect. While the Minnesota law now authorizes as many as 40 charters, only 17 were open this fall. (By contrast, Arizona has 47 schools in operation just a year after its charter law was passed.) Observers in Minnesota say the relatively low number stems from the requirement that school districts approve charters and the fact that the state offers a variety of other

school-choice programs, including open enrollment between districts and a college-enrollment option for some high school students. Most of Minnesota's charter schools are specialized programs that serve at-risk students or other distinctive groups. For example, the Metro Deaf School opened in St. Paul in 1993 to emphasize American Sign Language teaching, which a group of parents believed was a method that school districts refused to embrace. Another charter, the Cedar-Riverside Community School in Minneapolis, opened in 1993 and now operates in a cold-looking high-rise apartment complex where federal Section 8 housing subsidies help pay the rent for most tenants. In a ground-floor classroom, Austin McGregor is working on a project: a report about the ill health effects of spray paint on young graffiti artists. The lanky 10th grader says that's a big difference from a couple of years ago, when he wasn't working on much of anything at school. ``My grades went from Ds and Fs to a 3.8 average last year," he says. Like many people in this racially diverse, low-income neighborhood, McGregor feels a sense of ownership and involvement in the Cedar-Riverside school--a feeling he never had before. Residents had complained for years that they had no public school nearby and that the district shuffled their children around the city to help other schools meet desegregation mandates. The K-10 school has just 72 students, for which it receives about $3,000 per pupil from the state. It emphasizes interdisciplinary teaching and project-based learning such as McGregor's report on spray paint. His teacher, Christie Manisto, says some of her students had become involved in ``tagging"--slang for spraying graffiti--so she suggested a project they might find interesting. Across a courtyard and up several floors to a part of the housing complex called the Lighthouse, teacher Trudie Jones has a remarkable view of the Minneapolis skyline from her classroom. She would gladly trade that, however, for some new computers. The school spends a hefty portion of its budget on rent, and new technology has rendered its computers obsolete, says Jones, who teaches 5th and 6th grades. Like many charter school educators, Jones believes charters should receive extra funding for their start-up years. Enough money above and beyond the basic per-pupil amounts to put them on a strong financial footing. ``If charter schools are going to stay alive," says Jones, ``continuing to do everything on a bare-bones budget is not going to work." Kathryn Hartman, another teacher, admits that the school could use a few more students to shore up its budget. ``The amount of money we receive from the state is not adequate," she adds, noting that while charter schools receive state per-pupil expenditures, they don't benefit from the extra revenue districts take in from local taxes. As the

longest-running charter schools, the ones in Minnesota are also among the most closely watched. What many observers are looking for are signs that the presence of a charter school, or even the threat of one, is motivating school districts to improve or to implement programs they once resisted. Charter advocates call them ``second order" effects and believe they are one area where the concept has its greatest potential to spur widespread change. Too often, says Ted Kolderie, analysts of educational change look only at the ``first order" effects: the success or failure of the individual schools and the students enrolled in them. But, he says, ``the real purpose of the charter law is to cause the mainline system to change and improve. It would be strange not to evaluate the law in terms of its real purpose." Already, Kolderie and Joe Nathan can point to several notable examples of charter schools contributing to broader change.

An often-cited example is the St. Paul suburb of Forest Lake, where the district agreed to start a Montessori program in 1993, after a group of parents clamored for a charter school based on the educational method. The Rochester, Minn. district started a similar Montessori program after a private Montessori group asked the school board for a charter. In Boston, the district and the Boston Teachers Union created a ``pilot schools" program in 1994, months after the state enacted its charter law. Teachers can propose new programs as new schools or as schools within existing public schools--a concept similar to charter schools that many believe the union embraced only because of the new law. And, in Minnesota, charter advocates say they have been able to measure the effect of the law in human terms. ``Many parents and kids have said their lives have been transformed by this," says Nathan. Ember Reichgott Junge, a Minnesota state senator who sponsored the original charter school law, believes that changes in it will open the door to more charter schools. Under one of the new provisions, applicants who have been denied by their local board--but who received at least two ``yes" votes--can now appeal to the state board of education for a charter. ``I'm so pleased that other states are improving on the concept," adds Junge. Proponents say Massachusetts has one of the nation's strongest charter laws, largely because it removes local districts from any role in approving or rejecting charter applications. Instead, the state secretary of education, an appointee of the governor, makes those decisions. Now that laws are on the books and scores of schools are up and running, the process of measuring how well they're doing begins. Asked how the success of charter schools will be measured, both individually and in general, Junge says,``The best way to measure the charter law is by the way it has captured the enthusiasm and excitement of parents and

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educators. This is a true grassroots idea." But she quickly adds that lawmakers and others will expect a more definitive way to measure them. So far, evaluation of charter schools has consisted of anecdotal reports and many state-by-state calls to tinker with charter laws to make them better.

The first nationwide survey of charter schools, released last summer by the Education Commission of the States, found a surprising number geared toward children from troubled backgrounds. That contradicts the claims of many critics who once argued that the independent public schools would be tailored to well-off suburban children. But how is the success or failure of the concept ultimately to be measured? Several efforts are under way. The U.S. Department of Education has signed a $2.1 million contract with a consortium of research organizations to conduct a four-year study of charter schools. The Hudson Institute's Educational Excellence Network has received a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to examine how charter school laws in seven states have been implemented. A key principle of charter schools is that if they fail to perform, their government sponsors can pull the plug. In fact, charter advocates say the failure last year of a school in Los Angeles--Edutrain--due to financial mismanagement is a sign that the idea is working. Bob DeBoer, the director of a Minneapolis charter, the New Visions School, says many charter organizers are initially overwhelmed by the complexity of running what is essentially a small business. ``When you start a charter school, there's no blueprint," says DeBoer, whose K-8 school serves children with reading disabilities and attention-deficit disorder. ``It's an immense undertaking." The New Visions School features several innovative teaching methods. In the ``brain gym," for example, hyperactive pupils tumble around on mats. The school also uses biofeedback techniques, where students learn to harness their brain power for greater concentration on schoolwork. The 140-pupil charter school is on more solid financial footing than some others because it is sponsored by a nonprofit organization, A Chance to Grow, that has been around for several years. But that doesn't mean DeBoer can sit back and relax. ``In the end," he says, ``charter schools are more accountable than traditional public schools. I have yet to see a traditional public school closed in Minnesota because it isn't performing."

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Laws of the Land

By Drew Lindsay

In the past four years, the charter school concept has had the makings of a legislative juggernaut.

What was once a hazy educational notion has now become law in 19
states. Democrats and Republicans alike are hot for the idea, and thousands of applicants have put in their bids to open schools under the new laws.

Even teachers' unions and school board associations–some of which spent thousands of dollars to fight charter legislation– are signing on to the concept of publicly funded schools that operate outside most state and district regulations.

``It's a very powerful idea when you look at how quickly it has spread as legislation and how quickly it has gained general acceptance,'' says Charles B. Zogby, the policy director for Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge, whose charter school legislation is now being debated. ``In terms of education reform, how many ideas are there like that?''

The answer, of course, is not many.

But the history of education reform is littered with ideas that shine brightly and reap hosannas from all, only to flame out into a black hole of obscurity. Could charter schools follow a similar trajectory?

``I'd need a crystal ball to answer that,'' says Chester E. Finn Jr., a fellow at the Hudson Institute and a charter school advocate. ``Or maybe the entrails of a goat.''

Still, it doesn't take magical foresight to see the weaknesses in the charter school movement that plague it now and pose problems for the future. This year, at least half the state laws passed were watered-down versions of the original concept.

And supporters of the movement say that while the genuine article retains its inherent value, more of the cheap imitations may be on the way. Some recent converts to charter schools, they fear, may be co-opting the idea and pushing bills that embrace the concept in name only.

``There are a number of states that have laws that I would just say, `Why did you even bother?'' says Peggy Hunter, the president of the Minneapolis-based Charter School Strategies Inc., a nonprofit resource group for charter school advocates.

Also, the charter idea may be losing some of its cachet as fresh, bold reform. Education debate this year in such states as North Carolina, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Michigan focused not on charters but on efforts to decentralize power or create publicly funded tuition vouchers that would allow public school students to attend private schools.

``There is a concern that charters are getting lost in the sexier issues of vouchers and decentralization,'' says Louann A. Bierlein, the director of the Louisiana Education Policy Research Center at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. ``You really don't have a strong constituency behind charters because it falls in the middle between the two.''

As a result, charter advocates enter the second half of the 1990s facing a much different task than the one they

confronted at the beginning of the decade. Having proved itself in a sprint, the concept now has to gear up for a marathon.

Catalyst for Change

The charter school idea owes its quick success in part to its close ties to other popular reforms. It is a sister to site-based management, a kissing cousin of public school choice, and an in- law of the idea that school systems improve by ``scaling up.''

But many lawmakers embrace the concept because it promises to shake up the education system, something they are eager to do more than a decade after the first alarms sounded about the state of education.

``We've had 12 years now, and nothing's improved,'' says Cooper Snyder, the chairman of the Ohio Senate education committee and the author of a pending charter bill. ``We've tried to fix and fix and fix, and nothing has succeeded.''

In some states, charter laws have become the catalyst for change that lawmakers envisioned. Massachusetts' 1993 law is said to have spurred Boston school officials and the local teachers' union to create ``pilot schools'' that operate free from many state and district regulations. Five such schools opened this year.

Even bigger change may lie in store as school boards and teachers' unions--often the sharpest critics of charter schools-- adapt to the reality of laws on the books. This summer, the National Education Association announced that it would work with its affiliates in six states--Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, and Wisconsin--to help members who want to create new schools.

The move marked a surprising shift for the affiliates. Many of them were bitter opponents of legislation in their states, saying charter schools would drain funding for traditional schools and leave staff and students unprotected.

While some charter legislation allows schools to operate independently of the local district, nea affiliates will only help members who want to set up schools still tied to the local district. The goal will be to document charter schools' potential as a systemwide reform.

``It's time for us to get into the fray and shape this in a way to show that you can do innovative things within the system just as you can outside it,'' says Andrea DiLorenzo, the head of the union's charter school initiative.

``It's a turnaround,'' says Milo J. Cutter, a member of the Minnesota nea affiliate and the head of the City Academy charter school in St. Paul. ``It's probably not the earthquake that some people would want, but it's definitely a turnaround.''

Strong and Weak Laws

Still, the impressive gains posted by charters so far mask some problems that could stall the reform idea in the years ahead.

Though the concept calls for schools with maximum freedom from state and local control, some of the laws keep the schools tied to the district and state. Worse, these so-called ``weak'' or ``dead'' laws make it nearly impossible for applicants to receive a charter. (See ``Not All Charter Laws Are Created Equal, page 10.)

Weak laws have plagued the movement from the start, limiting the number of schools that can get off the ground. Fifteen schools have opened in states with weak laws, while 219 are open in the six states with the strongest laws

Georgia allows an unlimited number of charter schools, but only public school staff members can start them. Only three schools are up and running there. In Kansas, only local school boards can sponsor a school, and no one there has even applied.

In most states with weak laws, bills were watered down in the face of opposition from state teachers' unions and school board associations. These groups argued that charters would drain money from districts and undercut child- and workplace-protection laws.

But charter supporters say the unions and school boards have changed their tactics: Rather than fight charter bills, they are supporting weak ones.

This year, for example, the New Jersey Education Association reversed its stance against charter schools and has backed a bill that cleared the legislature's lower chamber almost unanimously.

That legislation, however, would limit the number of charter schools to no more than three per county and would require schools to hire certified teachers, as required by the collective-bargaining agreements in force in most districts. A bill in the Senate proposes no cap on the number of schools and would afford schools greater hiring freedom from the state, but the union's political clout means some sort of compromise is almost certain before any bill can pass.

The apparent change of heart by teachers' unions and school board groups makes charter advocates worry that any new laws passed will pack little punch.

Five of the eight laws passed so far this year are considered frail. ``More of the laws coming in now are pretty weak,'' says Hunter of Charter School Strategies. ``And that may be because the education establishment is now saying, `We'll help.'''

New Competition

The 1995 legislative session has also shown that charter schools have stiff new competition from reform ideas whose backers swept into office during last fall's elections.

In Pennsylvania, debate over Gov. Tom Ridge's tuition-voucher plan drowned out discussion of his charter school bill--perhaps one of the strongest proposed this year. And in North Carolina, charter legislation failed to pass as state leaders spent most of their time on a plan to loosen the state reins on schools.

The charter idea is appealing, says Jay Robinson, the newly appointed chairman of North Carolina's board of education, but decentralizing promised to give all the state's 2,000 schools more freedom.

``I see change resulting from charter schools, but I don't see it going as far as we need to go in education,'' Robinson says. If the decentralization idea succeeds, he adds, ``the people who support charters could get everything they're after and more.''

A charter bill passed in Texas, but Gov. George W. Bush Jr. believes more change will come from the idea of ``home rule'' school districts. Home rule, as approved by the legislature, will free districts from most state regulation if residents craft and approve at the ballot box a plan to run their schools.

``I wanted to take the charter concept one step further and allow districts to declare their independence from the state and say, `We're free to design the schools as we see fit,''' Bush said in an interview this fall.

Unlike a charter law, which allows a few individuals to design schools of their own, the home-rule concept invites entire districts to hash out their ideas of good education, he said. ``I can't see anything better than people coming together to talk about their schools and debate and philosophize about how to run their schools.''

In political terms, home-rule districts, decentralization, and vouchers may also have replaced charters as the education reforms that draw national attention and mark a governor as a bold leader.

Ridge's voucher push in Pennsylvania stirred talk that he would be the Republican vice presidential nominee in 1996. Other governors said to be contenders for a spot on the 1996 GOP ticket--Bush, Michigan's John Engler, and California's Pete Wilson--all touted plans to scrap their state's education code.

Engler, who pushed Michigan lawmakers in 1994 to pass one of the nation's strongest charter laws, spoke of charters this year as only the first step toward bigger change: home-rule districts. ``I believe that charter schools will be the key to unlocking an education renaissance,'' he said in a speech at the Harvard graduate school of education this spring.

``But I also understand that charter schools are only the beginning,'' Engler added. ``There must be radical change that reaches every district and every student.''

Such rhetoric was aimed at a national audience, says Bill Bryant, the chairman of the Michigan Senate education committee and a frequent ally of the governor. Engler ``was playing the game of one-upmanship with Bush and Wilson,'' he explains. ``And part of the game was `let's rewrite the school code.'''

A Movement Takes Shape

Some supporters dismiss the notion that the charter idea has peaked. Rather, they say, it is merely shaking out the kinks of early growing pains.

``It's all happened so rapid-fire that we haven't had time to think,'' says Jeanne Allen, the president of the Washington-based Center for Education Reform and a charter proponent. ``Now, we're starting to think.''

Advocates are also building a formal, national network to share expertise and resources. ``The charter movement has not been a movement until recently,'' Allen adds. ``It's been a disparate group of people in disparate states who didn't even know each other until they met in the parking lot after a conference one day.''

Charters will also likely continue to thrive as a fallback for lawmakers pushing decentralization and vouchers.

Both those reforms are a tough sell. Charters, on the other hand, marry deregulation and market-force impulses in a package that is much more politically palatable. In Michigan, Engler is once again pushing a rewrite of the charter law. Legislators this fall are revamping parts of the education code, but the governor's supporters say he now realizes that he doesn't have legislative support for scrapping it all.

The best hope of charter advocates may lie in studies now under way to determine whether the schools deliver the goods promised in terms of academic achievement and systemic change. But given the traditionally short half-lives of education reforms, such good news can't come soon enough.

The national evaluation of charter schools ordered by the U.S. Department of Education, for example, will not offer any data for another two or three years. ``By then,'' worries Isu's Bierlein, ``it may be too late.''

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American Visionaries

By Lonnie Harp
Mesa, Ariz.

When he looks at the empty space in the Sunvalley Plaza, between the denture lab and the doll store, David Gordon sees a high school.

``To me, it looks like a great open campus,'' he says, thinking of his future students wandering among the bookstore and the movie theaters down the sidewalk. ``There are a lot of places kids could go for breaks. And the landlord is willing to renovate.''

He is not deterred by the vacant storefront that says America's Music Dinner Theater couldn't make a go of it. Nor is he dissuaded by the notion that, in a struggling shopping center on the outskirts of Mesa, $4,000 per student may not buy more for him than it does for the local schools.

The state of Arizona is going to give away as many as 50 licenses this year to run a school, and Gordon hopes to get one of them.

The ambitious 29-year-old, a certified social-studies teacher who now works for a credit-card-collection agency, has a plan to help students make noticeable leaps in their achievement. And he is far from alone.

Gordon is one of nearly 100 people who have filed applications in Arizona this year to win a charter school. They all have dreams. And they all need a little of the state's cash to get them rolling.

In many ways, Arizona stands as a unique testing ground for the charter concept. Lawmakers here passed a charter school program in 1994 as unrestrictive as any in the country.

Several states have followed Minnesota's lead and defined who can apply for charters. Others, like Michigan, set limits on how many uncertified teachers can work in the new schools.

In several states like California, Georgia, and Kansas, the schools are not always an independent business.

The Arizona law opens up the application process to the widest range of prospective proprietors and gives charter schools more latitude to operate. But having fewer hoops to jump through has also raised concerns that the ``strong'' law may produce weak schools.

It's too early to say whether Arizona's law will pay off for Arizona's children. So far, its legacy is the most wide-open marketplace for new school ideas anywhere.

Arizona has approved 47 charter schools, quickly making it a major player among the 19 states with similar laws on the books. The state allows any public agency, individual, or private group to apply to create a school run with state aid and the promise of improved student achievement. Schools that don't show results could lose their charters.

State officials say 23 educators, 13 community organizations, and two groups of parents were among last year's initial charter winners. Thirteen private schools converted to charters.

The Glenmar Montessori School in Flagstaff is using the charter program as an opportunity to expand its

existing pre-K-3 program up to the 6th grade. The Intelli-School in Glendale is a brand- new high school with computer-heavy, self-paced classrooms pointing teenagers toward high-tech jobs.

Fresh Hope

For longer than David Gordon has been alive, William Maxwell has been trying to sell someone on his own notion of schooling. He has approached countless foundations, talked it over with fellow education professors, and explained it again and again to school officials. He once thought he'd found a sponsor in Switzerland, but came up empty. Arizona's charter school law may finally offer his dusty dream fresh hope.

Maxwell's preliminary application for the Global Academy for International Athletics would establish a high school in a yet- to-be-named Arizona city that would serve about two dozen teenagers. But it only skims the surface of what he believes is a revolutionary concept in public schooling.

His plan revolves around a simple idea: Students with a top-notch education turn into adults with top-notch jobs who bring home top-notch paychecks. He wants to supply his students with the best possible education, at whatever it costs. Then, the plan goes, graduates will agree to pay him back for the cost of their schooling--minus the $4,000 he'll get from the state each year-- after they become prosperous adults.

He says he will guarantee each student at his charter school admission into one of the world's 100 best colleges in exchange for what will be a niggling check once they have joined the ranks of the rich and famous.

To get his idea started, Maxwell is focusing on a sports-themed charter school, mostly because he figures that parents who see athletic promise in their children will go to extremes to get them the best training. He freely admits that $4,000 per student will not buy the world-class education he envisions. ``Four thousand dollars is a poverty sum," he insists. And he realizes that his idea is still at least a little extreme.

``The research is there--if you give a child a first-rate education, the return is phenomenal," says Maxwell, an education professor at the Scottsdale branch of Ottawa University, which has its home base in Kansas. And though he has had little luck with the idea in the three decades since he developed his proposal, Maxwell hasn't given up hope.

``I spent an incredible amount of what little income we had for several years, and nobody was interested," he says. ``But now I'm excited. With seed money from the state, this is my one big opportunity."

`Choice and Change'

In many ways, the state charter school office here works more like the Small Business Administration, processing loan applications from enthusiastic entrepreneurs, than an education agency. Everybody walks in with something to sell--which many experts argue is refreshing in itself. The public schools, they say, have been lulled into a trance--and no longer respond to things like the market and their customers and quality. Proponents of competition and deregulation say the dizzying noise of the charter school sales pitches sounds like music.

``We are hearing from a plethora of individuals, and the unifying trend is that everyone wants choice and change," says Robert Mills, a special assistant to the president of Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Mich., and the director of the university's charter school office.

In the past year, CMU has dealt with about 100 applicants and rejected half, granting 46 charters so far. Mills says the applications process usually takes the better part of a year. CMU officials ask applicants to set up a board of directors, line up at least $200,000 in start-up funds, and hire a lawyer.

California, which along with Michigan and Arizona is among the most active states in terms of granting charters, recently reached its state-imposed limit on charter schools: an even 100. Observers there say the applicants who didn't make it to a final contract usually underestimated the financial planning involved.
``Most of the people we talk to have a background in education,

but the ins and outs of finance are a mystery for a lot of people," says Sue Bragato, the executive director of the California Network of Educational Charters. ``We've made it a very difficult thing to do in California."

In Arizona, a charter applicant can apply through the state charter board, which can grant up to 25 charters each year, or the state school board, which can approve an additional 25. Applicants can also seek approval from any school district in the state, although only a handful of the state's charter schools have so far been approved that way. School districts are not limited in the number of charters they can grant.

Applicants must pass a criminal-background check and come out relatively clean on a credit check. They suggest a curriculum, put forward a business plan and budget, outline their house rules, and pay $32 for a fingerprint check of the school's named sponsor. They must also take an oath that they'll abide by the law's few civil-rights and safety limits and agree to administer state tests. Applications last year ranged from the size of the Tucson Yellow Pages to the thickness of a high school book report.

The entire process is much more inviting and flexible than in Michigan, California, or most any other state.

Proponents of the law see Arizona's freewheeling system as a poster-child for deregulation. Others, in Arizona and elsewhere, wonder what dangers lurk behind that lack of scrutiny. Already, there have been some startling examples.

In California, Americans United for Separation of Church and State recently complained that the Tubman Village School in San Diego stresses the religious teachings of Rudolph Steiner. Steiner, an Austrian occultist, founded a spiritualist society in 1912 that blended Hindu beliefs about reincarnation with Zoroastrianism, an ancient pre-Islamic religion. San Diego school district officials are still investigating the complaint.

In Michigan, the Noah Webster Academy in Ionia raised eyebrows last year with its plan to link home-schooling families via computer. Critics contended that the loose network with families would likely promote religious teaching by the parents. And after winning a charter from the local school district, the academy agreed to pay it a portion of its charter funding as administrative fees. The state never funded the school.

State officials in Arizona have promised to police the charter schools and hold them accountable for student results, but, beyond that, they pledge to maintain a hands-off approach.

That's what worries the state's largest teachers' union. ``We support ideas and innovations and teachers being able to make decisions, but there is still the question of the impact on children by what everyone is calling experiments," says Judith Sebastian, the director of educational policy and practice at the Arizona Education Association.

The union has been drawn into the issue because charter schools are not required to hire certified teachers. ``There is such a desire at the state level for charter schools to spread and succeed that they haven't really looked yet at how you protect students from people who are only out to make a name for themselves or promote some philosophy," Sebastian says.

There are, after all, scores of reasons to sell something, as Arizona officials learned last year when they sorted through their first batch of charter school applications. Some people wanted to see how much young children might learn from studying basal readers and intensive phonics, some wanted to push heavy doses of careerism or discipline on teenagers, others were just looking for a new line of work.

Ernest and Delite Gaddie's proposed McGuffey Basic School for K-6 students in Mesa never got off the ground after state officials discovered that until 1991 the couple had run the Mountain States Technical Institute near Phoenix. The trade school, specializing in training heating and cooling technicians and clerical workers, closed abruptly as federal officials were preparing to cite the Gaddies for the school's high student default rate on federal loans.

The Human Resources Academy, a counseling center in Mesa, applied for a charter to open a high school for troubled youths that would contract with the East Valley Youth and Family Support Centers. But after winning

approval last May, the charter was denied in June when state officials learned that the state psychologists' board had suspended the license of the East Valley center's president in April after patients filed eight complaints.

The Phoenix Academy of Learning was approved and then scrapped after concerns that it planned to use a textbook written by L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of the controversial Church of Scientology, and intended to send all its teachers to an out-of- state training program.

Despite the rejects, the state has created dozens of new schools. They range from Montessori kindergarten programs to the year- round ungraded sister schools known as EduPrize and EduPreneurship to an ambitious Phoenix high school called Citizen 2000. With its focus on multicultural and international education, Citizen 2000 offers its 7th to 12th graders classes in English, Spanish, French, Hebrew, Japanese, Italian, and Zulu, as well as formal training in ballroom dancing, etiquette, and international protocol.

Improvement Through Change

``Some people perceive this as a way to create a small business, some teachers have said this provides an opportunity to do what they've always wanted to do, and some parents see a chance to seize control of their child's education," says Kathryn Kilroy, the former executive director of state's charter school office.

``If I were a board member," she says, ``my first question would be, `What is your motivation?' Because if you're not focused on pupil achievement and parent and student choice, you're missing what all of this is about."

The underlying thought is that innovation will spark performance--that a $4,000 check for every kid who signs up, a license to school children without a step-by-step guide, and some state planning money will enable charter schools to boost students past their public school peers.

That is what's written between the lines of David Gordon's business plan for his proposed Global Renaissance Academy of Distinguished Education. ``The mission of grade is to provide a superior and vigorous academic program that promotes a humanistic education where students develop cultural literacy, an appreciation of knowledge (it is power) creativity, responsibility, interactive skills, progressive citizenship values, and cognitive proficiency in areas such as writing, critical thinking, problem analysis, and communication," he writes.

Gordon wasn't happy as a substitute social-studies teacher in Lake Havasu City last year and knows that his collection-agency job amounts to biding time. So he is working 10 to 20 hours each week to write a solid application.

To gain every advantage, he has attended all the workshops the state has offered to help applicants. ``I am planning diligently," he says.

He is hoping that after the state's two charter-granting boards judge this year's applications and interview the finalists, he will be among the 50 who get a charter. Then, the real challenge of surviving as a business and turning $4,000 per student into something educational will begin.

William Maxwell faces a tougher climb. His school must still clear the hurdles of the Arizona law's prohibitions against selective admissions and discrimination based on athletic ability. But he says he will find a way to make his idea a reality through the charter school law. It is a determination that he sees on the faces of most of the people who gather at the charter school orientation sessions he has been attending.

``I detect a kind of archetypal educator mentality of being frustrated by working within the system," Maxwell says. ``We are all striking out, some blindly and some wisely, but all of us looking for a new path."

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